GBV AoR HELPDESK
Research Query

Gender-Based Violence AoR

Query: Handling GBVIMS data sharing requests from external actors [1]

Author: Katie Robinette

> *"Across the sector, we see data driving more and more decision-making as we see the value of evidence in informing our planning, advocacy and resource mobilization. For this reason, quality GBV data is in high demand, and we want GBV data to be used to inform response. However, beyond the issues of confidentiality and need-to-know, there is sometimes an additional reluctance to share GBV data because of the high level of misinterpretation and the opportunities for misuse of the data"* (GBVIMS Podcast, 2020).

Overview

Information sharing is an essential component of interagency GBV coordination and collaboration. It is a complex exercise in coordination, trust-building, and adhering to ethical standards. Data from the GBVIMS is collected by providers of GBV services (such as case management or psychosocial support) in humanitarian settings. It captures selected variables surrounding incidents of violence that are reported when a person seeks services, such as the type of violence, child vs. adult survivors, or the relationship between the survivor and the perpetrator.

Safe and Ethical Data Sharing
While the GBVIMS captures data on individual survivors who seek a service, this level of detail is used only by service providers to manage their cases. When we talk about sharing GBVIMS data,

---

What is the GBVIMS?

The Gender-Based Violence Information management System (GBVIMS) was created to harmonize data collection on GBV in humanitarian settings, to provide a simple system for GBV project managers to collect, store and analyze their data, and to enable the safe and ethical sharing of reported GBV incident data. The intention of the GBVIMS is both to assist service providers to better understand the GBV cases being reported as well as to enable actors to share data internally across project sites and externally with agencies for broader trends analysis and improved GBV coordination. The data pertains only to reported incidents; thus, it is not be a reflection of the prevalence of GBV in a given community.

---

[1] Suggested citation: Robinette, K. (2020) Handling GBVIMS data sharing requests from external actors. London, UK: GBV AoR Helpdesk.

we are talking about data that is aggregated, compiled, anonymous, consented (IASC, 2015; WHO, 2007; UNFPA, 2019).

To enable regular data sharing, actors using the GBVIMS (data gathering organizations or DGOs) should agree on an Information Sharing Protocol (ISP) with a set of ground rules and guiding principles for compiling and sharing GBVIMS data. At a minimum, actors should be clear on what data will be shared, for what purpose, who will compile the data, and how and when actors will be able to access the compiled data.

Information should be shared for a specific purpose, not simply for the sake of sharing.

Actors external to the ISP may request DGOs to share GBVIMS data. The degree to which non-identifiable information can or should be shared must be determined on a case by case basis. In responding to this type of request, here are some steps to consider:

1. **INFORM** - Inform humanitarian actors (other sectors, coordination), donors and governmental authorities about the GBVIMS generally.
   - Educate them on ethical standards in GBV data management and sharing
   - Be clear from the onset about information that GBVIMS-users are capable of sharing (aggregated, compiled, anonymous, consented) and what cannot be shared (information on individual survivors).

2. **PURPOSE** –The responsibility rests on the requester to justify their request for data sharing.
   - For what purpose will the data be used?
   - Which data points are being requested? Do they align with the purpose?
   - What information is already publicly available that may be used? (e.g. DHS, MICS, safety audits, research studies)
   - How will the data be shared by the requester and at what level (Camp? Regional?)
   - How will the data be protected?
   - How will the requestor share back to the requestee after aggregation or analysis? The flow of information should be two ways.

What is an Information Management Protocol (ISP)?
An Inter-Agency [Information Sharing Protocol](#) is an agreement between service providers and partners on how to share information on GBV incidents. An ISP allows for discussions and provides a framework based upon guiding principles on the safe and ethical sharing of GBV data. A clearly worded ISP is important way to protect data, survivors, and service providers.

What is an external actor?
An external actor is an actor that is not a formal signatory on the ISP or already approved for data sharing by the ISP. This could be donors or participants in a coordination meeting, for example.

How can an external actor access GBVIMS data?
External actors can request to access GBVIMS data safely and easily, and using existing data is often preferable to collecting additional data. External actors can submit a written request for data sharing as per the national ISP (see sample ISP text in resources and request form in Annex). This process could be fast-tracked upon urgency and agreement of the DGOs. Type of data shared and use of data by an external actor should be in line with the ISP.

What can GBVIMS data be used for?
- inform and improve response
- illustrate trends in reported incidents
- highlight gaps in services or prevention activities
- programmatic decision-making
- coordination
- resource mobilization
- advocacy campaigns

When NOT to share GBVIMS data?
- there is no clear purpose or proposed use of the data
- to follow up or verify individual GBV cases
- the risks outweigh the benefits

3. **RISKS** – Analyze the risks vs. benefits of sharing the requested data. Evaluate with other actors any risks to individuals, the community, staff and programs, that may arise as a result of sharing data in your context. Pay particular attention risks in sharing case numbers compared to percentages (see below). Above all, service providers must protect clients' right to confidentiality.

4. **CONTEXT** - Ensure that data shared is well-analyzed and presented in a comprehensive way: tell the story behind the data. Produce analysis products such as advocacy reports that may be helpful for donors, UN agencies, governmental authorities or other actors.

5. **SUPPORT** - Reach out to the GBVIMS Steering Committee for support on country-level advocacy, at gbvims@gmail.com.

Risks of sharing GBVIMS data and how to mitigate them

GBV data is one of the most sensitive types of data collected in humanitarian contexts, and it is notorious for being misused, misunderstood, and misrepresented. For this reason, we have a high responsibility to protect GBV data and service providers may be protective and hesitant to share.

> *"These are not just percentages, statistics, and figures – there is a survivor behind every number. How we use that information… can save lives, help women and girls heal and recover from this violence and trauma, and restore dignity." (Bain, 2014)*

One recommended way to minimize risks when sharing GBV data is to share percentages and trend data rather than case numbers, which should be specified in the ISP in order to explain limitations on sharing case numbers externally if a request arises. The table below summarizes some of the common risks related to sharing GBV data, and how these risks are affected by the type of data shared (case numbers vs. percentages/trends).

| Risk	Sharing Case Numbers	Sharing Percentages/Trends
Identification of survivors	Sharing case numbers may inadvertently lead to the identification of survivors or service providers, even where no identifying information is shared. For example, sharing data related to survivors with disabilities at a lower geographical level (i.e. a town or a camp) can lead to the identification of the survivor if there are few persons with disabilities in this specific town or camp. A breach in confidentiality of this nature may cause survivors to lose trust in GBV services or provoke stigma or backlash against survivors or service providers.	**Ensures confidentiality and respect for survivors.** According to GBV guiding principles, survivors' safety is paramount. The duty of maintaining confidentiality by ensuring that data remains anonymous is not limited to removing the name and contact information of survivors, but also ensuring that when specific data points are put together that it is still not possible to use information for identification purposes. If non-identifying information can link back to survivors, then it should not be shared. In this regard, sharing percentages prevents further risks to link the data back to individuals or group of individuals.

Assuming prevalence	Even when accompanied by contextual information and caveats on how the data was collected, case numbers are often misinterpreted as prevalence data- people assume that the numbers show how many survivors have been affected by GBV at all, rather than how many people have accessed services.[2] This can undermine the work done by GBV actors and risks pushing donors and decision-makers to de-prioritize attention given to the GBV sector in the humanitarian response.	**Diminishes the likelihood that readers will understand GBV data as overall GBV prevalence or incidence rates.** Therefore, sharing percentages instead is the best guarantee that this mistake will not be made, provided that this is accompanied by a caveat explaining that GBVIMS trend data is representative only of reported cases.
Narrow understanding	Though not good practice, case numbers usually feel sufficient when shared, even when they are not accompanied with an analysis. This will limit the understanding of the trends and not result in effective action. For example, case numbers may be misinterpreted as representing only one type of violence, such as conflict-related sexual violence, when this does not actually reflect the reality of the women and girls seeking services.[3] [4]	**Promotes data analysis and links patterns and trends to programming and advocacy.** Using percentages is an incentive for humanitarian actors to produce analysis that ultimately will support linking trends to programming and advocacy. It increases accountability of GBV actors to actually use the data they collect.
Dependency on numbers	In the long term, sharing case numbers perpetuates an unnecessary dependency on numbers in order to trigger responses, and limits our capacity to respond to nuances in the context. *"It is important to remember that GBV is happening everywhere. […] all humanitarian personnel ought to assume that GBV is occurring and threatening affected populations; treat it as a serious life-threatening problem […], regardless of the present or absence of concrete 'evidence'."* (IASC, 2015: 12)	**Avoids putting humanitarian actors in a position where they may be inclined to deduce whether numbers are 'high enough' to merit a response**. GBV increases in emergencies, and there is no 'threshold' for GBV response. Therefore, numbers are not required to justify response, but instead to analyze how best to respond. Looking at trends rather than numbers encourages actors to conduct more in-depth analysis, allows us to understand which survivors are walking through our doors, and how can we tailor our services to meet their needs?

---

[2] See iceberg explanation in Guimond and Robinette, (2014).
[3] For examples of common misinterpretations of GBV data, and of nuanced trend analysis compared to a narrow focus on conflict-related sexual violence, see Guimond and Robinette, (2014).
[4] In Lebanon, GBV trends were used to confront myths about what services were needed. One such myth was that violence against women occurred in Syria related to conflict and was no longer happening after those who fled arrived in Lebanon. GBVIMS data showed that this was not the case, illustrating a more nuanced reality for women and girls, and strengthened advocacy to ensure continued funding for needed, lifesaving GBV services. See GBVIMS Podcast, (2018).

# Existing standards and guidance around GBV information sharing
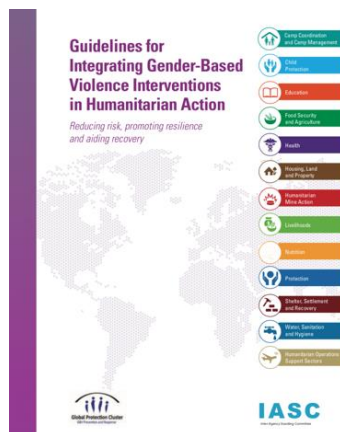
IASC. (2015) Guidelines for Integrating GBV Interventions in Humanitarian Action

Pg 47: Guiding GBV principals and the survivor-centered approach, particularly relevant for information sharing:
- Guaranteeing confidentiality
- Respecting the wishes, rights and dignity of the survivor

https://gbvguidelines.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/2015-IASC-Gender-based-Violence-Guidelines_lo-res.pdf
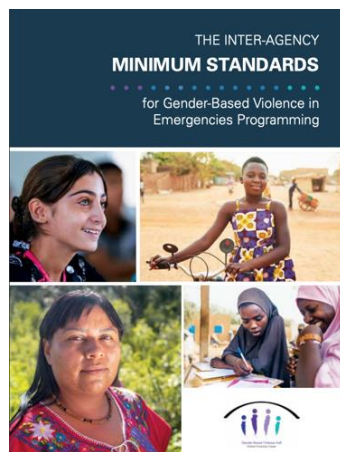
UNFPA. (2019) Interagency Minimum Standards for GBV in Emergencies Programming.

Standard 14: "*It is not recommended to report GBV case numbers, as these can be easily misinterpreted, and doing so can compromise confidentiality, particularly in situations where numbers of cases or service providers are low. Moreover, this information is not useful and can be misleading as it undermines the extent to which GBV is happening. Trend data, like that generated by GBVIMS, allows for more informed decision-making based on patterns over time.*"

https://www.unfpa.org/minimum-standards

WHO. (2007) Ethical and safety recommendations for researching, documenting and monitoring sexual violence in emergencies.

"[Ethical] principles have several important implications for sexual violence information gathering. The obligation to distribute the benefits of information gathering, for instance, requires careful consideration of:
- *how information will be used,*
- *who will see it,*
- *how the information will be reported and to whom,*
- *for what purposes will it be reported,*
- *who will benefit from it and when"*

https://www.who.int/gender/documents/OMS_Ethics&Safety10Aug07.pdf

GBVIMS Resources and Guidance

Podcasts

GBVIMS Podcast. (2020) What's the danger with misinterpreting GBV data?
https://player.fm/series/gbvims/whats-the-danger-with-misinterpreting-gbv-data

GBVIMS Podcast. (2018) What survivor data is safe to share?
https://player.fm/series/gbvims/what-survivor-data-is-safe-to-share

Video shorts

Good and Bad Practices in Information Sharing
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L6KUxYMNcIg

Safety and Ethics in GBV Data Management
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CvBUHb7siJk

GBVIMS: Information Sharing Protocol
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ptsjp28Yzw4

GBVIMS Information Sharing Protocol Template

"Each time external agencies or actors, not already approved for data sharing by the data gathering organizations (DGOs), submit a request for GBVIMS information, [NATIONAL CONSOLIDATION AGENCY] will issue a written request to each of the DGOs for authorization to share data. Each request for authorization to share consolidated GBVIMS data will specify: the reason/purpose for the request for information, what the information will be used for, how the information will be used, and how the information produced with the consolidated data and analysis will be fed back to the DGOs. The consolidated data will be shared only after receiving authorization from all of the DGOs."

http://gbvims.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/Annex-F-GBV-Information-Sharing-Protocol-Template.pdf
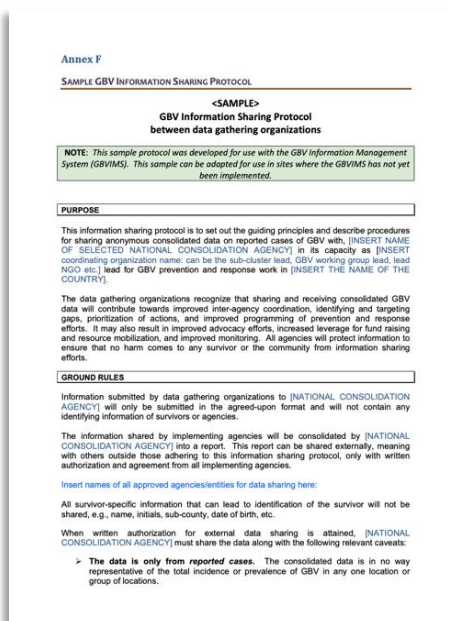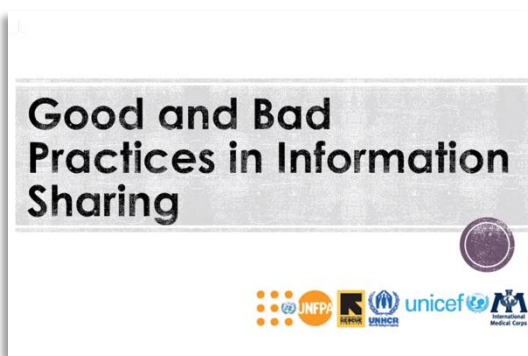
Bibliography

Bain, A. (2014) Gender-Based violence: stop looking for 'proof' and put survivors first. The Guardian.

GBVIMS Podcast. (2020) What's the danger with misinterpreting GBV data?

GBVIMS Podcast, (2018), What survivor data is safe to share?

Guimond, MF; Robinette, K. (2014) A survivor behind every number: using programme data on violence against women and girls in the Democratic Republic of Congo to influence policy and practice. Gender & Development. http://www.gbvims.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/Publication_Survivor-behind-data_DRC_2014.pdf

Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC). (2015) Guidelines for Integrating Gender-Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action: Reducing risk, promoting resilience and aiding recovery.

UNFPA. (2019) Inter-agency Minimum Standards for GBV in Emergencies Programming.

WHO. (2007) Ethical and safety recommendations for researching, documenting and monitoring sexual violence in emergencies.

The GBV AoR Help Desk

The GBV AoR Helpdesk is a unique research and technical advice service which aims to inspire and support humanitarian actors to help prevent, mitigate and respond to violence against women and girls in emergencies. Managed by Social Development Direct, the GBV AoR Helpdesk is staffed by a global roster of senior Gender and GBV Experts who are on standby to help guide frontline humanitarian actors on GBV prevention, risk mitigation and response measures in line with international standards, guidelines and best practice. Views or opinions expressed in GBV AoR Helpdesk Products do not necessarily reflect those of all members of the GBV AoR, nor of all the experts of SDDirect's Helpdesk roster.

Annex: GBVIMS Request Form for External Actors (template)

GBV IMS

Request Template for External Actors

Name of Requesting Organization and Focal Point	
Data Points Requested	
What is the purpose of the data request?	
How will data will be used?	
How will the information produced will be shared back with GBVIMS organizations (final product)? Will GBVIMS organizations be given a chance to comment on the final product?	

My organization agrees not to share the received GBVIMS data with other parties:

[ ] YES   [ ] NO

My organisation agrees to include the caveat below in the documentation produced that contains the requested GBVIMS data:

[ ] YES   [ ] NO

The data shared is only from reported cases, and is in no way representative of the total incidence or prevalence of Gender-Based violence (GBV) in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. These statistical trends are generated exclusively by GBV service providers who use the GBV Information Management System (GBVIMS) for data collection in the implementation of GBV response activities in a limited number of locations across Cox's Bazar and with the consent of survivors. This data should not be used for direct follow-up with survivors or the afore-mentioned organizations for additional case follow-up. The following information should not be shared outside your organization/agency/cluster/ministry. Failure to comply with the above would result in revoking pre-approved data sharing/ or refusal of future requests for data.

Name and position:
Organization:
Date & location:

Signature: